

Sermon 66: The Signs of the Times

John Wesley

Methodist · Post-Reformation · Sermon

STROMATA 169

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INTRODUCTION

Taking Christ's rebuke of the Pharisees, who could read the weather but not the moment they were living through, Wesley works backward through the signs that should have identified the Messiah's coming, then turns the same question on his own eighteenth century: what should Christians of his day be able to discern, and why do so many miss it? The structure is careful and expository, moving from Old Testament prophecy fulfilled to a pointed contemporary application. It's a smaller, tighter sermon than some of his set-piece pieces, built around a single scriptural rebuke rather than a doctrinal system. Expect close textual reading before the sermon opens outward to its present-day argument.

"Ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?"

Matthew 16:3

- The entire passage runs thus: "The Pharisees also, with the Sadducees, came, and tempting, desired him that he would show them a sign from heaven. He answered and said, When it is evening, ye say, It will be fair weather: for the sky is red. And in the morning, It will be foul weather to day: for the sky is red and lowering. O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?" [Matt. 16:1–3]
- "The Pharisees also with the Sadducees came." In general, these were quite opposite to each other: but it is no uncommon thing for the children of the world to lay aside their opposition to each other, (at least for a season) and cordially to unite in opposing the children of God "And tempting;" that is, making a trial whether he was indeed sent of God; "desired him that he would show them a sign from heaven;" which they believed no false prophet was able to do. It is not improbable, they imagined, this would convince them, that he was really sent from God. "He answered and said unto them, When it is evening, ye say, It will be fair weather: for the sky is red. And in the morning, It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and lowering." Probably there were more certain signs of fair and foul weather in their climate than there are in ours. "O ye hypocrites;" making profession of love, while you have enmity in your hearts; "ye can discern the face of the sky," and judge thereby what the weather will be; "but can ye not discern the signs of the times," when God brings his first begotten Son into the world?

- Let us more particularly inquire,

I. First, What were the times, whereof our Lord here speaks; and what were the signs, whereby those times were to be distinguished from all others? We may then inquire,

II. Secondly, What are the times which we have reason to believe are now at hand; and how is it, that all who are called Christians, do not discern the signs of these times?

Part 1

- Let us, in the First place, inquire, What times were those concerning which our Lord is here speaking? It is easy to answer; the times of the Messiah; the times ordained before the foundation of the world, wherein it pleased God to give his only begotten Son, to take our nature upon him, to be "found in fashion as a man," to live a life of sorrow and pain, and, at length, to be "obedient unto death, even the death of the cross," to the end that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life." This was the important time the signs whereof the Pharisees and Sadducees could not discern. Clear as they were in themselves, yet so thick a veil was upon the heart of these men, that they did not discern the tokens of his coming, though foretold so long before.
- But what were those signs of the coming of that Just One, which had been so long and so clearly foretold, and whereby they might easily have discerned those times, had not the veil been on their heart? They are many in number; but it may suffice to mention a few of them. One of the first is that pointed out in the solemn words, spoken by Jacob a little before his death: (Gen. 49:10:) "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come." All, both ancient and modern Jews, agree, that by Shiloh we are to understand the Messiah; who was therefore to come, according to the prophecy, "before the sceptre," that is, the sovereignty, "departed from Judah." But it did, without controversy, depart from Judah at this very time; — an infallible sign, that at this very time Shiloh, that is, the Messiah, came.
- A Second eminent sign of those times, the times of the coming of the Messiah, is given us in the third chapter of the prophecy of Malachi: "Behold, I send my messenger, and he shall prepare my way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple." (Mal. 3:1). How manifestly was this fulfilled, first, by the coming of John the Baptist; and then by our blessed Lord himself, "coming suddenly to his temple!" And what sign could be clearer to those that impartially considered the words of the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 40:3:) "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!"
- But yet clearer signs than these, (if any could be clearer,) were the mighty works that he wrought. Accordingly, he himself declares, "The works which I do, they testify of me." And to these he explicitly appeals in his answer to the question of John the Baptist; (not proposed, as some have strangely imagined, from any doubt which he had himself; but from a desire of confirming his disciples, who might possibly waver, when their Master was taken from their head: "Art thou he that should come," the Messiah? "Or look we for another?" No bare verbal answer could have been so convincing, as what they saw with their own eyes. Jesus therefore referred them to this

testimony: "He answered and said unto them, Go and show John the things which ye hear and see; the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached unto them." (Matt. 11:4, 5.)

- But how then came it to pass, that those who were so sharp-sighted in other things, who could "discern the face of the sky," were not able to discern those signs which indicated the coming of the Messiah? They could not discern them, not for want of evidence — this was full and clear, — but for want of integrity in themselves; because they were a "wicked and adulterous generation;" because the perverseness of their hearts spread a cloud over their understanding. Therefore, although the Sun of Righteousness shone bright, yet they were insensible of it. They were not willing to be convinced: Therefore they remained in ignorance. The light was sufficient; but they shut their eyes, that they might not see it: so that they were without excuse, till vengeance came upon them to the uttermost.

Part 2

- We are in the Second place, to consider what are the times which we have reason to believe are now at hand? And how is it that all who are called Christians, do not discern the signs of these times?

The times which we have reason to believe are at hand, (if they are not already begun,) are what many pious men have termed, the time of "the latter-day glory;" — meaning the time wherein God would gloriously display his power and love, in the fulfilment of his gracious promise that "the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth, as the waters cover the sea."

- "But are there in England, or in any part of the world, any signs of such a time approaching?" It is not many years since, that a person of considerable learning, as well as eminence in the Church, (then Bishop of London,) in his pastoral letter, made this observation: "I cannot imagine what persons mean, by talking of a great work of God at this time. I do not see any work of God now, more than has been at any other time." I believe: I believe that great man did not see any extraordinary work of God. Neither he, nor the generality of Christians, so called, saw any signs of the glorious day that is approaching. But how is this to be accounted for? How is it that those who can now "discern the face of the sky," who are not only great philosophers, but great divines, as eminent as ever the Sadducees, yea, or the Pharisees were, do not discern the signs of those glorious times, which, if not begun, are nigh even at the door?
- We allow, indeed, that in every age of the Church, "the kingdom of God came not with observation," not with splendour and pomp, or with any of those outward circumstances which usually attend the kingdoms of this world. We allow this "kingdom of God is within us;" and that consequently, when it begins either in an individual or in a nation, it "is like a grain of mustard seed," which at first "is the least of all seeds," but nevertheless, gradually increases, till "it becomes a great tree." Or, to use the other comparison of our Lord, it is like "a little leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened."

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But may it not be asked, "Are there now any signs that the day of God's power is approaching?" I appeal to every candid, unprejudiced person, whether we may not, at this day, discern all those signs, (understanding the words in a spiritual sense,) to which our Lord referred to John's disciples? "The blind receive their sight:" Those who were blind from their birth, unable to see their own deplorable state, and much more to see God, and the remedy he has prepared for them in the Son of his love, now see themselves, yea, and "the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. "The eyes of their understanding being now opened, they see all things clearly. — "The deaf hear:" Those that were before utterly deaf, to all the outward and inward calls of God, now hear, not only his providential calls, but also the whispers of his grace. — "The lame walk:" Those who never before arose from the earth, or moved one step toward heaven, are now walking in all the ways of God; yea, "running the race that is set before them." — "The lepers are cleansed:" The deadly leprosy of sin, which they brought with them into the world, and which no art of man could ever cure, is now clean departed from them. And surely never in any age or nation, since the apostles, have those words been so eminently fulfilled, "The poor have the gospel preached unto them," as it is at this day. At this day the gospel leaven, faith working by love, — inward and outward holiness, — or, (to use the terms of St. Paul,) "righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost" — hath so spread in various parts of Europe, particularly in England, Scotland, Ireland, in the islands, in the north and south, from Georgia to New-England and Newfoundland, that sinners have been truly converted to God, thoroughly changed both in heart and in life; not by tens, or by hundreds only, but by thousands, yea, by myriads! The fact cannot be denied: we can point out the persons, with their names and places of abode. And yet the wise men of the world, the men of eminence, the men of learning and renown, "cannot imagine what we mean by talking of any extraordinary work of God!" They cannot discern the signs of these times! They can see no sign at all of God's arising to maintain his own cause, and set up his kingdom over the earth!

- But how may this be accounted for? How is it, that they cannot discern the signs of these times? We may account for their want of discernment on the same principle we accounted for that of the Pharisees and Sadducees; namely, that they likewise are, what those were, an "adulterous and sinful generation." If their eye was single, their whole body would be full of light: but suppose their eye be evil, their whole body must be full of darkness. Every evil temper darkens the soul; every evil passion clouds the understanding. How then can we expect, that those should be able to discern the signs of the times who are full of all disorderly passions, and slaves to every evil temper? But this is really the case. They are full of pride: They think of themselves far more highly than they ought to think. They are vain: They "seek honour one of another, and not the honour that cometh of God only." They cherish hatred and malice in their hearts: they give place to anger, to envy, to revenge: They return evil for evil, and railing for railing. Instead of overcoming evil with good, they make no scruple of demanding an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. They "savour not the things that are of God, but the things that are of men." They set their affections, not on things above, but on things that are of the earth. They "love the creature more than the Creator:" They are "lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God." How then should they discern the signs of the times? The god of this world, whom they serve, has blinded their hearts, and covered their minds with a veil of thick darkness. Alas, what have these "souls of flesh and blood," (as one speaks) to do with God, or the things of God?
- St. John assigns this very reason for the Jews not understanding the things of God; namely, that in consequence of their preceding sins, and wilful rejecting the light, God had now delivered them up to Satan, who blinded them past recovery. Over and over, when they might have seen, they would not; they shut their eyes against the light: And now they can not see, God having given them up to an undiscerning mind : Therefore they do not believe, because that Isaiah said, (that is, because of the reason given in that saying of Isaiah,) "He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their hearts, that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, and be converted, and I should heal them." The plain meaning is, not that God did this by his own immediate power; it would be flat blasphemy to say, that God, in this sense, hardens any man; but his Spirit strives with them no longer, and then Satan hardens them effectually.
- And as it was with them in ancient times, so it is with the present generation. Thousands of those who bear the name of Christ are now given up to an undiscerning mind. The god of this world hath so blinded their eyes, that the light cannot shine upon them; so that they can no more discern the signs of the times, than the Pharisees and Sadducees could of old. A wonderful instance of this spiritual blindness, this total inability to discern the signs of the times mentioned in Scripture, is given us in the very celebrated work of a late eminent writer; who supposes, the New Jerusalem came down from heaven, when Constantine the Great called himself a Christian. I say, called himself a Christian; for I dare not affirm that he was one, any more than Peter the Great. I cannot but believe, he would have come nearer the mark, if he had said, that it was the time when a huge cloud of infernal brimstone and smoke came up from the bottomless pit! For surely there never was a time wherein Satan gained so fatal an advantage over the Church of Christ, as when such a flood of riches, and honour, and power broke in upon it, particularly on the Clergy!

- By the same rule, what signs would this writer have expected of the approaching conversion of the Heathens? He would doubtless, have expected a hero, like Charles of Sweden, or Frederick of Prussia, to carry fire, and sword, and Christianity, through whole nations at once! And it cannot be denied, that since the time of Constantine, many nations have been converted in this way. But could it be said concerning such conversions as these; "The kingdom of heaven cometh not with observation?" Surely every one must observe a warrior rushing through the land, at the head of fifty or sixty thousand men! But is this the way of spreading Christianity, which the author of it, the Prince of Peace, has chosen? Nay, it is not in this manner that a grain of mustard seed grows up into a great tree. It is not thus that a little leaven leavens the whole lump. Rather, it spreads by degrees farther and farther, till the whole is leavened. We may form a judgment of what will be hereafter, by what we have seen already. And this is the way wherein true Christian religion, the faith that worketh by love, has been spreading, particularly through Great Britain and its dependencies, for half a century.
- In the same manner it continues to spread at the present time also, as may easily appear to all those whose eyes are not blinded. All those that experience in their own hearts the power of God unto salvation will readily perceive how the same religion which they enjoy, is still spreading from heart to heart. They take knowledge of the same grace of God, strongly and sweetly working on every side; and rejoice to find another and another sinner, first inquiring, "What must I do to be saved?" — and then testifying, "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit doth rejoice in God my Saviour." Upon a fair and candid inquiry, they find more and more, not only of those who had some form of religion, but of those who had no form at all, who were profligate, abandoned sinners, now entirely changed, truly fearing God and working righteousness. They observe more and more, even of these poor outcasts of men, who are inwardly and outwardly changed; loving God and their neighbour; living in the uniform practice of justice, mercy, and truth; as they have time, doing good to all men; easy and happy in their lives, and triumphant in their death.
- What excuse, then, have any that believe the Scriptures to be the Word of God, for not discerning the signs of these times, as preparatory to the general call of the Heathens? What could God have done which he hath not done, to convince you that the day is coming, that the time is at hand, when he will fulfil his glorious promises; when he will arise to maintain his own cause, and to set up his kingdom over all the earth? What, indeed, unless he had forced you to believe? And this he could not do, without destroying the nature which he had given you: For he made you free agents; having an inward power of self-determination, which is essential to your nature. And he deals with you as free agents from first to last. As such, you may shut or open your eyes, as you please. You have sufficient light shining all around you; yet you need not see it unless you will. But be assured God is not well pleased with your shutting your eyes and then saying, "I cannot see." I counsel you to bestow an impartial examination upon the whole affair. After a candid inquiry into matter of fact, consider deeply, "What hath God wrought?" "Who hath seen such a thing? Who hath heard such a thing?" Hath not a nation, as it were, been "born in a day?" How swift, as well as how deep, and how extensive a work has been wrought in the present age! And certainly, "not by might, neither by power, but by the Spirit of the Lord." For how utterly inadequate were the means! how insufficient were the instruments to work any such effect; — at

least, those of which it has pleased God to make use of in the British dominions and in America! By how unlikely instruments has God been pleased to work from the beginning! "A few young raw heads," said the bishop of London, "what can they pretend to do?" They pretended to be that in the hand of God, that a pen is in the hand of a man. They pretended, (and do so at this day,) to do the work whereunto they are sent; to do just what the Lord pleases. And if it be his pleasure, to throw down the walls of Jericho, the strong-holds of Satan, not by the engines of war, but by the blasts of rams' horns, who shall say unto him, "What dost thou!"

- Meantime, "blessed are your eyes, for they see: many prophets and righteous men have desired to see the things you see, and have not seen them, and to hear the things that you hear, and have not heard them." You see and acknowledge the day of your visitation; such a visitation as neither you nor your fathers had known. You may well say, "This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad therein." You see the dawn of that glorious day, whereof all the prophets have spoken. And how shall you most effectually improve this day of your visitation?
- The first point is, see that you yourselves receive not the blessing of God in vain. Begin at the root, if you have not already. Now repent and believe the gospel! If you have believed, "look to yourselves, that ye lose not what you have wrought, but that ye receive a full reward!" Stir up the gift of God that is in you! Walk in the light, as he is in the light. And while you "hold fast that which you have attained, go on unto perfection." Yea, and when you are "made perfect in love," still, "forgetting the things that are behind, press on to the mark, for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."
- It behoves you, in the next place to help your neighbours. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." As you have time, do good unto all men, but especially unto them that are of the household of faith. Proclaim the glad tidings of salvation ready to be revealed, not only to those of your own household, not only to your relations, friends, and acquaintance, but to all whom God providentially delivers into your hands! "Ye," who already know in whom you have believed, "are the salt of the earth." Labour to season, with the knowledge and love of God, all that you have any intercourse with! "Ye are as a city set upon a hill;" ye cannot, ye ought not to be hid. "Ye are the light of the world: men do not light a candle, and put it under a bushel;" how much less the all-wise God! No; let it shine to all that are in the house; all that are witnesses of your life and conversation. Above all, continue instant in prayer, both for yourselves, for all the Church of God, and for all the children of men, that they may remember themselves, and be turned unto our God, that they likewise may enjoy the gospel blessing on earth, and the glory of God in heaven!

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